Breakthru Beverage Florida donates $45 million to Step Up For Students for scholarships serving lower-income Florida families

BY PAUL SOOST

Breakthru Beverage Florida, one of the largest distributors of wines, spirits and non-alcoholic beverages in the state, announced Jan. 19 its contribution of $45 million to the Step Up For Students Scholarship Program. Breakthru’s donation is funding more than 6,880 K-12 scholarships for lower-income Florida schoolchildren for the 2017-18 school year.

Since 2011, Breakthru Beverage has contributed more than $254 million, providing more than 45,600 scholarships.

“Communities thrive when we all do our part and work together,” Breakthru Beverage is proud to support Step Up For Students and give Florida students an opportunity to reach their highest potential,” said Eric Pfeil, executive vice president of Breakthru Beverage Florida. “We’re confident these students will aim high and will be future leaders in our community. We look forward to a long relationship with Step Up For Students.”

This is the seventh consecutive year Breakthru Beverage Florida has contributed to the nonprofit organization that administers the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program for financially disadvantaged schoolchildren. The program is funded with tax-credited donations and allows parents and schoolchildren to choose between a K-12 scholarship that helps with private school tuition and fees, or one that assists with transportation costs to out-of-county public schools.

“Thanks to the support and generosity of our donors, Step Up For Students is helping parents find the best learning environment for their children that they otherwise couldn’t afford,” said Doug Tuthill, president of Step Up For Students. “On behalf of donors, Step Up For Students is helping parents find the best learning environment for their children that they otherwise couldn’t afford.”

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The 7-year-old third-grader, said it “felt weird being out of school” for about three weeks. Annabel Krystaszek, an 8-year-old third-grader, said Irma was the first hurricane she has experienced. Her family lost power for about three weeks. Anna Krystaszek, an 8-year-old third-grader, said it “felt weird being out of school” after Hurricane Irma hit.

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Seton Strong: Finding the normal after Hurricane Irma

BY DAVID TUTHILL

Maria Niebuhr, first year principal of St. Elizabeth Seton Catholic School in Naples, Florida, sits behind her desk in an office filled with boxes stacked on boxes, placed on a floor stripped away to bare concrete.

As she holds two pictures showing the $1 million in damages the school sustained from Hurricane Irma, the sound of a screw gun pierces the air as it's drilled into a nearby wall.

This is the new normal for St. Elizabeth Seton. The pre-K3 through eighth-grade school lost power for two weeks during the storm and was forced to remain closed for three and a half weeks, longer than every other school under the Diocese of Venice.

Of the school’s 202 students, more than 70 students are on the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program for lower-income families.

Students young enough to enjoy a daily nap must do so on blankets placed on bare concrete. Black plastic has been placed over areas where the drywall was ruined. In several classrooms, entire walls are covered with it.

Clockwise, Maria Niebuhr, first year principal of St. Elizabeth Seton Catholic School in Naples, Florida, said dealing with the aftermath of Hurricane Irma has been stressful, but the school’s spirit cannot be broken. Seventh-grader Adaora Obiohgwu, 12, far right, said Irma was the first hurricane she has experienced. Her family lost power for about three weeks. Anna Krystaszek, an 8-year-old third-grader, said it “felt weird being out of school” after Hurricane Irma hit.

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Florida’s public schools are growing. And educational options are growing faster.

Public schools added more than 16,000 students in grades pre-K through 12 in the 2016-17 school year. A new analysis by Step Up For Students, using data from the Florida Department of Education, shows the state’s full spectrum of school choice options added 43,000 students that school year.

The annual “Education Changing Landscapes” document shows nearly 1.7 million pre-K through 12 students in Florida enrolled in educational options outside their neighborhood district school. That number has increased more than 207,000 over the last five years and now accounts for 46 percent of pre-K through 12 students.

Like its predecessors, this year’s report shows how choice has rapidly become the norm in Florida. The growth of some options may be spurring school districts to offer more.

The three most widely used school choice options remain public schools. District magnet and specialty programs hold the top spot, with just shy of 300,000 students.

Private school choice programs like the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship (FTC) and Gardiner Scholarship program saw the largest enrollment growth. They grew by 26 percent and 64 percent, respectively. The number of private school students not using scholarships or vouchers to pay tuition increased by just 1,927 students, or 0.8 percent.

Step Up For Students helps administer both the FTC and Gardiner programs. About 99 percent of students on the two programs are enrolled in private schools through Step Up.

There was one methodology change this year: The state also counts 3,835 charter school students among those who attend university lab schools. We elected to count these students under lab schools, rather than charter schools.

This change is reflected in the Changing Landscapes infographic below, to note that Florida Atlantic University and Florida State University both enroll charter school students in their lab schools.

### Key Findings

- 46.4 percent of pre-K-12 students in Florida attend a school of choice.
- 39 percent of all K-12 students receiving public funds or scholarships attend a school of choice.
- Total pre-K-12 public school enrollment increased by 16,049, or 0.5 percent.
- Total pre-K-12 school choice enrollment increased by 43,690, or 1.3 percent.
- Largest growth rates: Gardiner Scholarships (64 percent), tax credit scholarships (26 percent) and Advanced International Certificate of Education (25 percent).

### Options on the Rise: 1.7 Million Florida Students Choose

School choice is now mainstream. Of Florida’s 3.7 million PreK-12 students, 46 percent attended a school of their choice during the 2016-17 school year.

- 299,999 in Choice and Magnet programs at 1,712 district schools
- 287,227 in Open Enrollment in 52 school districts
- 279,920 in 654 Charter Schools privately operated under contract with districts
- 237,886 in private schools paying on their own
- 139,757 in Career and Professional Academies at 453 high schools
- 134,948 in private PreKindergarten Scholarships for 4-year-olds
- 98,936 in Tax Credit Scholarships for low-income students
- 87,462 in Home Education while reporting results to districts
- 43,619 in Advanced International Certificate programs for 11th and 12th graders
- 35,968 in McKay Scholarships for special-needs students
- 15,482 in Full-time Virtual Instruction
- 14,004 in International Baccalaureate at district schools
- 8,056 in Gardiner Scholarship for special-needs students
- 7,398 in Lab Schools and Lab Charter Schools run by five universities
- 3,717 in School Transfers related to state or federal performance thresholds

**= 1,694,379 Students at Schools of Their Choice**

Source: 2016-17 Florida Department of Education data
EverBank inspires hope for Florida schoolchildren through $1.5 million contribution to the Step Up program

BY PAUL SOOST

EverBank, a division of TIAA, FSB, announced a $1.5 million contribution to the Step Up For Students Scholarship Program. The donation will fund about 229 scholarships for the 2017-18 school year. This marks the 14th year EverBank has supported the scholarship program. Since teaming with Step Up in 2004, the company has contributed more than $14.5 million, the equivalent of 3,050 scholarships.

“EverBank is proud to support the dedicated work of Step Up For Students through our contributions to the scholarship program. Providing opportunities for lower-income Florida families to find the right learning environment for their children will lead to avenues to a brighter tomorrow,” said TIAA, FSB, Vice President and CRA Officer Joe Pfountz. “We believe this relationship will continue our efforts to inspire hope and empower change in the communities in which we work and live.”

The announcement was made at St. Matthew’s Catholic School in Jacksonville, which serves pre-K through eighth-grade students. Nearly 40 percent of its 225 students use Step Up For Student scholarships.

The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program for financially disadvantaged Florida schoolchildren is funded by corporations with tax-credited donations. It allows parents and students to choose a K-12 school that is best suited to their child’s learning needs. Nearly 40 percent of its 225 students use Step Up For Student scholarships.

“EverBank has been a longtime supporter of Step Up For Students in providing options for lower-income Florida families to find the environment that best meets their child’s learning needs. We appreciate and applaud their commitment and contributions,” said Step Up For Students President Doug Tuthill. “On behalf of Step Up and the students participating in our program, we thank EverBank for their generosity.”

The key to a successful relationship is creating a solid foundation, and then brick by brick it grows and strengthens. Just like it did building its theme park, LEGOLAND® Florida Resort has been fostering relationships in the community in which it does business and beyond, including – and primarily – with children.

“Our resort is built for kids,” said David Brady, LEGOLAND Florida Resort senior public relations manager. “Children are the heart of everything we do, and it’s the mission of every one of our ‘Model Citizens’ (employees) to put a smile on the face of a child no matter what their role may be, whether interacting directly with guests or in a back-of-house capacity.

“With that in mind, we want to ensure that our philanthropic efforts beyond our walls are aimed at improving the lives of children, giving them reasons to smile. And that dovetails nicely with what Step Up For Students does.”

Located in Winter Haven about 50 miles east of Tampa at the site of the old Cypress Gardens Adventure Park, LEGOLAND first partnered with Step Up For Students in 2016 and has increased its 2017 commitment by 250 percent with $250,000. That will provide about 36 lower-income students with a Florida Tax Credit Scholarship through Step Up For Students.

“Our hope is that through our partnership, we’re able to brighten the lives of children and make a real impact on their futures,” Brady said.

LEGOLAND’s philanthropic philosophy of “Children are our primary concern,” and work with nonprofits whose goals are “academically, imaginatively and creatively enrich children’s lives” truly fits well with Step Up’s mission of providing educational options for disadvantaged children.

“We are really excited about this partnership with LEGOLAND Florida Resort,” said Step Up President Doug Tuthill. “What kid didn’t grow up loving LEGO® sets? To have this park in our backyard and be able to work with them in supporting Florida’s children is a great match. We are very grateful for their renewed commitment to giving kids who need it most a chance to succeed.”

While LEGOLAND is indeed a theme park, it is also a place of learning, one that teaches children valuable lessons without them necessarily realizing it.

The park offers Bricktastic STEM Educational Experiences. Creative and engaging play has been at the heart of the LEGO brand since the company started in 1932, and play has the powerful ability to develop children’s social, emotional and cognitive skills,” Brady said. “By combining the creativity of the LEGO brand with standards-based STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics), we’re able to offer educational experiences unlike anything available elsewhere. They’re programs that educate, entertain and engage kids while having fun.

“They blend storytelling with core educational concepts in ways that bring the material alive through the skills of our ‘edu-tainers.’ We believe that education in the STEM fields is critical to society’s growth and success.”

As well as educating and entertaining children, the popular vacation destination has been a solid contributor to Florida’s economy since it opened about six years ago.

“Our biggest accomplishment has been the creation of more than 2,000 peak-season jobs here in Winter Haven, and, as of our first five years, nearly $1 billion in estimated economic impact according to a study we commissioned. With the closure of what was known as Cypress Gardens Adventure Park in 2009, after more than 70 years of nearly continuous operation, many people likely thought those jobs were lost for good.”

Companies: Claim your tax credit

If your company has enrolled in the Step Up For Students Scholarship Program this year and has not yet notified us, please let us know so that we can extend our gratitude to you and assist your company with taking the necessary steps to receive your tax credits, including the required certificate of contribution for your tax returns. If your company has not yet notified us of your pledge, please do so by emailing Tim Bodamer at tbodamer@sufs.org.
Niebuhr says she still is still dealing with leaks nearly every day.

While insurance will cover the costly damages, the school is trying to recoup its $100,000 deductible to make other repairs that have long plagued it. Years of quick fixes left the 36-year-old school more vulnerable when Irma struck as a Category 2 hurricane on Sept. 10.

The rebuilding plan is to place all the students in portable classrooms so repairs and enhancements can be done simultaneously. It could take several months to complete all the work.

Despite all this, Niebuhr remains impressed by the resilience of her students.

“The children become immune to it, but it’s sad,” she says. “We’ve got to move forward with all of this.”

Annabel Krystaszek is a bright-eyed, 8-year-old in Erin Lanigan’s third-grade class. Her family had no power for a week and lost a big tree in her yard; Annabel loved the tree. To deal with the stifling heat, her family left their doors and windows open.

“It felt weird being out of school,” Annabel says. “I was happy to get math and spelling homework.”

Adaora Obidiegwu, 12, said Irma was the first hurricane she has experienced. The seventh-grader said her family lost power for about three weeks.

“I was scared when the storm came,” she says. “I didn’t like being out of school much. It was a little bit of a break, but I missed it.”

Irma might have battered Seton, but the school’s spirit has not been dampened. Upon returning to school, every child received a yellow #SetonStrong hard hat. A relaxed dress code on Fridays allows students to wear jeans and their #SetonStrong T-shirts.

In the spirit of solidarity, several Catholic schools across the country, including some as far away as Illinois and Connecticut, have “adopted” Seton and have raised money for its cause. An anonymous California benefactor sent a $5,000 check, while St. Joseph Catholic School in Bradenton held a fundraiser for St. Seton while repairing damages of its own.

One of the bulletin boards near Seton’s courtyard that was spared damage is lined with letters of support and drawings sent from a school in Hawaii.

In Irma’s aftermath, Seton students created an art project that involved coloring and branding rocks with the #SetonStrong motto and placing them throughout the community. The project caught the attention of the Naples Daily News, which ran a feature story about the positive vibes the project spread through the city.

St. Elizabeth Seton is battered, but Niebuhr says its spirit cannot be broken.

“Everyone here cares about each other,” she says. “The heart of the school is in each and every one of these teachers and students. We are Seton Strong regardless of what happens here. We have pride in who we are.”